

SYNODALITY: BIBLICAL FOUNDATION, THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND, AND EXISTENTIAL UNDERSTANDING

By Bishop A. Peter Abir of Sultanpet, India

“Enlarge the Space of your Tent” (Isa 54:2)

Introduction - Let me begin my address with an African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” This underlines the nature and perspective of a synodal Church. Journeying together involves accommodating all Christian believers of various ritual and denominational churches, nonbelievers, and even anti-Christian believers. The Holy Father’s conviction of the life of the Church is spelt out by him: “The path of the synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium.”¹

The intrinsic nature of this synod lies in “enlarging the space of our tent” (Isa 54:2). In this process of “enlarging” there remains a challenging task of listening to all sorts of people, even to the voice of the voiceless, in forming the ‘kingdom of God’ where, in the mind of Jesus, relational and a holistic aspect of salvation takes place and in short, God alone reigns. Achieving the fraternal communion as that of the early disciples of Christ (Acts 2:44-47) with a participatory and prophetic commitment, this synodal journey proclaims Jesus Christ by attraction and sacrifice. In fact, synodality has been meditated, practised, and carried on in the history of the Catholic Church. Now, our Holy Father Francis expands further our understanding of it,² with a renewed thrust of Communion, Participation, and Mission.³ The whole dream of the Holy Father is to create “not another Church but a different Church,” open to the newness that God wants to suggest.⁴ This paper is meant to highlight the biblical foundation, theological background and existential understanding of the synodal journey of the Church today.

1. What is Synod and Synodality? The word ‘synod’ comes from a combination of two Greek words, ‘syn’ (‘with’ or ‘together’), and ‘hodos’ (‘path’ or ‘road’ or ‘journey’). In an abstract noun form, the word would refer to something that has to do with being together on the path. Though in ecclesiastical parlance ‘synod’ refers to an institution or convocation or coming together, often temporary, as in ‘synod of bishops’⁵, in existential reality, it is merely an experience of being together. Indeed, the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,⁶ from October 2021 to October 2024, is a synod, in the mind of Pope Francis, it is a process of inverting the pyramidal Church.⁷

In this respect, a synodal Church means a Church in which all of us, beginning from lay faithful, women and men, religious, clergy, bishops, and the pope, walk together in all aspects of life and mission. There is no question of journeying ahead or journeying after; it is journeying together in which we surrender our instincts for leading or policing, and we become co-pilgrims. This phrase also drives home the dynamism that is needed for

our life. Hence, the synod of 'bishops' is the synod of the whole Church, with a point of convergence of the dynamism of mutual listening in the Holy Spirit. It is a 'journeying together' of God's faithful towards seeing God 'face to face' (1 Cor 13:12). As Paulose Mangai clarifies, Pope Francis grounded his understanding of synodality which removes the bifurcation of the Church into *Ecclesia docens* (the teaching Church) and *Ecclesia discens* (the listening Church) to the *sensus fidei* of the people of God. ⁸ This is because the *sensus fidei* respects the instinctive ability of the faithful to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church. ⁹ This is the prime reason of the Synod 2023 Preparatory Document published by the Vatican on 7 September 2021. What Pope Francis exhorted in *Evangelii Gaudium* becomes relevant in the synodal process of the whole Church: "All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary disciples" ¹⁰

2. Biblical Foundation - The glimpses of synodality are found all through the pages of Sacred Scripture. God created the human person, man and woman, in his image and likeness as a social being called to work with him, in a life of communion, caring for the universe and directing it towards its goal (cf. Gen 1:26-28). In the calling of Abraham, the first historical person noted in the Bible, God willed that from a family emerges a nation, which will enter into a covenant with Him. Moses exercised his ministry in a synodal way: appointed judges (cf. Ex 18:25-25), delegated elders (cf. Num 11:16-17, 24-30), involved the Levites (cf. Num 1:50-51). The 'People of 5 The Synod of Bishops is a new reality in the ecclesiology and the canon law of the Roman Catholic Church, a fruit of the Second Vatican Council. Cf. J. Schotte, "The Synod of Bishops: A Permanent yet Adaptable Church Institution," in *Studia Canonica* (1992) 26, 289-306. ⁶ There are three types of synods: ordinary, extraordinary, and special. The ordinary synods are convoked at regular intervals. The present Synod for a Synodal Church 2021-2023 is the 16th ordinary synod; the 15th was on "young people, faith, and vocational discernment," and the 14th was on "the vocation and mission of the family in the church and in the contemporary world." An extraordinary synod is called to deal with matters which require speedy resolution. The last one was in 2014, on "the pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization." The synod is special when it discusses matters directly affecting a determined region. In 2019, a special synod was convoked addressing the concerns of the Pan-Amazon region, and the outcome was *Querida Amazonia* (2020). ⁷ Felix Wilfred, "Synodality in Action with Butterfly Effects," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, Vol. 85/10 Oct 2021, 10. ⁸ Paulose Mangai, "Pope Francis, Synodality and Synod 2023," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, Vol. 85/10 Oct 2021, 5 ⁹ Pope Francis, Rio de Janeiro, 28 July 2013. ¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.

God' (Qahal Yahweh) became an all-embracing concept involving men, women, children, slaves, and foreigners. The Bible originated from God, journeying with the created world through 'his people' Israel. The word of God has been handed down to us through the synodal journey of the people of God down the centuries. We understand that the whole Bible, we see it is centred around Jesus Christ (cf. St. Jerome) whose birth is a synodal journey from the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit for the salvific mission in the world. As such Jesus Christ is the man of the Synod, having communion and participation in human life fully (cf. Phil 2:6-7) for a specific mission of journeying with us to the heavenly Father.

The Judges were people, who by the divine vocation received or on their own, fought for themselves and for the people. The appointment of the first king was done because of collective discernment of the people ('sensus fidei'). The prophets acted as the communal conscience of the people and through their prophecies of doom and hope preached conversion, warned against social injustice, cultic aberrations, and oligarchic decisions, and summoned people to covenantal faithfulness.

Jesus of Nazareth, the word become flesh, showed us the glory of God, whose face is mercy (misericordia). His teachings, parables, and his journeys pointed to a Kingdom, characterized by freedom, equality, fraternity, and justice, which is both realized and eschatological. He had different circles of collaborators – apostles, disciples, followers, and benefactors, in spite of deserting him, misunderstanding him, betraying him, and denying him. The Preparatory Document of the Synodal process further indicates the biblical foundation for the Synodal journey: It is "the Lord Jesus who presents Himself as 'the way, the truth, and the life' (Jn 14:6), and Christians, His followers, were originally called 'followers of the Way' (cf. Acts 9:2; 19,9.23; 22,4; 24,14.22)." 11 In fact, the key ingredients of synodality are symphony, solidarity, and synergy. We understand what is meant by symphony and solidarity, a way to express who we are as Christians and who we are becoming together as Church through the work of the Holy Spirit. 12 Secondly, the word 'synergy (s??e????)' Paul uses this word in Rom 8:28 to mean "to work together for good.' As mentioned above, in this Synod, the Bishop of Rome joins hands with the entire people of God, and with entire humanity as well to walk with a purpose of witnessing to and attaining the reign of God. This is well founded in the words of Jesus when he said: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Moreover, Christianity was first called 'the Way.' It is not surprising, then, that the Bible instructs believers to 'walk' a certain way. Even today we hear others ask us about 'our journey.' Walking the journey means to live as disciples of Jesus, following Him on 'the Way' that leads to a harmonious life, a pre-taste of eternal life. We are able to do this as we are baptized into the Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit and are sanctified - increasingly formed into the life of Jesus through the power of His Holy Spirit. Paul

encourages us to walk in faith: “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16); and “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (Gal 5:25).

Accordingly, the post-resurrection community fed itself with the Word and the breaking of the bread (cf. Acts 2:44-47). Being guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church in the apostolic period, defined its identity differentiating it from Judaism and involving the Gentiles. The proclamation of the kerygma – passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – was its main aim. When people heard the message of Peter (cf. Acts 2:16-21), the people, having been cut to their heart, asked him: ‘What do we have to do, my brothers? Peter told them: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (cf. Acts 2:36-41). In this respect, the journey of the Synod is the revival of repentance and baptismal life for the life of the world; and that is the mission. 13

In this way, the Early Church redefined its mission of prayer and ministry to the Word (cf. Acts 6:4) and gathered in Council to solve its problems and challenges (cf. Acts 15). The Epistles defined the Church as the body of Christ and invited the members to celebrate their gifts and charisms (cf. 1 Cor 12; Eph 4). The Book of Revelation reminds us about the journey that we march towards the New Heaven and the New Earth (cf. Rev 21), which is the believers’ destiny (Rom 8:19). Hence, the hallmarks of synodality ‘listening, speaking out, celebration, co-responsibility, authority, participation, discernment, decision-making, and dialogue’ have their foundations in the Bible. Synodality, therefore, is “the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives the constituent element to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission. 14

3. Theological Background - 3.1 The Trinitarian Root - The concept of Synod is rooted in the Trinitarian reality of God-head. It is rooted in the fact that God came to meet the created world in a threefold figure: as Creator, Lord of the history of salvation, Father, and Judge, as revealed in the Old Testament; as the Lord who, in the incarnated figure of Jesus Christ, lived among human beings and was present in their midst as the “Resurrected One”; and as the Holy Spirit, whom they experienced as the helper or intercessor in the power of the new life (cf. CCC 253). At the same time, the Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Spirit and also the same with the Son and the Spirit. 15 In our belief of the Trinity it is clear that God is one Being but three co-equal and co-eternal Persons. Moreover, we believe that inseparable in what they are, the divine persons are also inseparable in what they do, and their functions are distinct from each other. The underlining theme of the synodal journey of Communion, Participation and Mission perfectly blends in the Trinitarian reality of the God-head. Each divine person is distinct from the other functions differently but complements the other. This is what is meant by Pope Francis when he said: “The Church contemplates and imitates the life of

the Blessed Trinity, a mystery of communion ad intra and the source of mission ad extra.” 16 In convening this Synod on Synodality the Holy Father’s intention of letting in the life of the Church the fresh air of unity in diversity, participatory mission and inclusiveness in all respects is very evidently rooted in the reality and life of the Holy Trinity.

3.2 The Communitarian Root - The Church is the subject of this synod. The dream of this synodal journey is to see a Church that fully lives a Christological paradox: boldly proclaiming its authentic teaching while at the same time offering a witness of radical inclusion and acceptance through its pastoral and discerning accompaniment. 17 Here proclamation and witness are underlined as the nature and function of the Church, the people of God. This concept is based on the theological nature of the Church envisioned by the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Lumen Gentium*). The Church is the people of God serving to promote the reign of God and the salvation of men and women and these people exists in the mystical body of Christ (cf. Rom 12:4-5). In fact, the Church is always understood as the people of God; the people, being his own (cf. Exod 19:5; 23:22), God made a covenant with them (cf. Lev 26:9-12; Jer 32:38) and this covenant was perfected by Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 11:25), thus the Church becomes a chosen people of God (cf. 1 Pet 2:9-10). Therefore, “the mystery of God revealed in the communion of human and divine in Christ is continued in the world through the communion of God in the spirit with the faithful and communion of the people of God among themselves.” 18 It was the community of disciples who started enjoying equality, fraternity and communion (cf. Acts 2:42-26) that gave rise to the concept of the People of God.

The synodal structure of the Church, living a participatory and inclusive ecclesial process ‘offers an opportunity to express themselves and be heard.’ 19 Accordingly, the synodal ecclesial vision replaces the pyramidal model, which is associated with the hierarchy or perfect society model, with an ‘inverted pyramid model’ where the ‘people of God’ are at the ‘apex.’ 20 The people of God become a key source for theological reflection in synodality. Discernment is the foundation of this theology whereby one, having listened to the Holy Spirit and having reflected on current realities, arrives at a practical solution. Inclusion becomes another characteristic of synodal theology. 21 It shifts the focus of theology from doctrine to the people, and to the peripheries.

The early Catholic theology such as that of Saint Augustine adopted an ‘either-or’ model to theology – either matter or spirit, either God or human person, either heaven or earth, either universal or local. 22 But the synodal theology subscribes to a ‘both-and’ model of theologising. The clergy, bishops, cardinals, and even the pope himself are all located beneath the people, playing the role of undergirding systems of support for the wider believing faithful, not franchise branch managers, or guardians and dispensers of grace. 23 This is the mark of a truly synodal church, which can both teach and listen. Besides,

the *Vademecum* for the synod on synodality (2021) presents the tagline of the synod – communion, participation, and mission – in a circle. The picture depicted there portrays dynamism, dialogue, discernment, and celebration that happen amidst all.

3.3 The Missionary Root - The word ‘mission’ today in many parts of the world is anathema sit. However, we note that the dictum of the present synod with the emphasis given by The Preparatory Document ends with the word: Mission. In this context, the participatory role of the laity is revitalized as directed by *Lumen Gentium*. It underlined very clearly that all people of God share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission of Jesus Christ. 24 The synodal participation and communion demand that the lay faithful also very actively and responsibly participate, as per their own gift of charism, in the governing and evangelical mission of the Church. By virtue of baptism, and being reborn in Christ, they share a common dignity and responsibility in building up the Body of Christ through various functions in the Church. Thus, the synodal process is reliving the conciliar teaching of the radical equality of all the baptised for a collective ministry in accordance with each one’s vocation and function. And all the faithful by virtue of baptism, are missionaries, 25 telling the story of Jesus in each one’s context. Therefore, in the synodal Church, the missionary dimension defines the pastoral orientation of each member. As Pope Francis says, “We move forward, boldly take initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast.” 26

Mercy or compassion is at the core of synodal pastoral vision. The mission of the Church is not to build walls, but to break them down so that the Christians could readily welcome and embrace the strangers, the neglected and the abandoned. 27 Christians must be pushed to action through their mercy and compassion. 28

No doubt, ‘proclamation to all the people’ (*ad gentes*), the original mandate of Jesus, is the source and strength of our missionary witness in a constantly changing world. Accordingly, the mission to the nations is to be carried out in today’s context, especially in the suffocation of “anti-s” in a disturbed society, as a mission among the nations (*ad inter-gentes*), remembering that we ‘are always missionary disciples.’ 29 Pope Francis has very vividly proposed: “An evangelising community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.

Anti-Christian forces are very much alive in today’s social environment. Life-witness becomes a clear manifestation of our ‘carrying the Word of God’ to all. Pope Francis invites every Christian believer to be a missionary in life. He calls it a ‘proclamation by attraction,’ which can also be termed as a proclamation by the witness. The missionary witness envisaged by the Church 30 is given in many ways; through respect and love, understanding and acceptance of others as they are, and solidarity in efforts to

accomplish all that is noble and good. The evangelical efficacy of witness surpasses all speech. The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life eventually must be proclaimed by the word of life. The post-synodal exhortation *Verbum Domini* very succinctly puts it: “The Church must go out to meet each person in the strength of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2:5) and continue her prophetic defence of people’s right and freedom to hear the word of God, while constantly seeking out the most effective ways of proclaiming that word, even at the risk of persecution.” 31

Pope Francis observed: “Ours is a Church of martyrs; they suffer, they give their lives, and we receive the blessing of God for their witness.” 32 In this respect, *Verbum Domini* underlines the need to discern the “signs of the times” present in history and not to flee from a commitment to those who suffer and the victims of varied forms of selfishness. 33 Also, a prophetic witness brings all sorts of mental and physical torture, not only by anti-forces in society, politics, religious movements and governments, but also by our ‘own’ people who share the same faith and vocation in religious communities. In short, the mission, therefore, is the Gospel made alive. 34 The Word of God, through our witnessing life, will intrude faster even into the ‘hard soil’ of humans.

4. Existential Understanding - The book of Revelation talks about the reality of living the word of God as follows: “Take it and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach but sweet as honey in your mouth” (cf. Rev 10:9). This is also true of our synodal journey, a new beginning after Vatican II and a great event of transformation in the Church; all looks honey. True, in the synodal processes of ‘journeying together’, the Church sensed the guiding lights of God’s Spirit. On the other hand, the awareness of the ‘challenges’ subverts synodality, giving a clarion call to the Church to dispel the dark spots to ‘journey ahead’ with faith. 35 Positively, synodality will evoke among the faithful and ministers a sense of wonder at everyone around them and should be an opportunity to value everyone in his or her unique identity and difference. It will create in the faithful and ministers a new way of thinking, *novus habitus mentis*. 36 However, from the existential understanding of the universal context and the life of the local Churches we face big challenges to proceed with our synodal journey within the parameters underlined by the synodal concept of communion, participation, and mission.

4.1 Challenges in General - First, there is a question: ‘Where will synodality lead us?’ This question emerges out of our uncertainty about the course that it will take, the ambiguity that it is beset with, and the vulnerability with which it is exposed. Is the synodal process a journey towards Emmaus, that will enlighten us and send us back to ‘Jerusalem’? Or is it a rush towards an ecclesial black hole, where everything of our tradition will become extinct? The synod for synodal church involves consultation at various levels, and with various groups to reach a collective discernment. But, how far? Can we keep the institution of marriage equal with the LGBTQAI+ 37 way of life? When one feels that childbearing is burdensome can we permit contraception? 38 The

modern world conveniently believes that what is good to one is true to him/her. When it comes to virtues in general and moral issues such as abortion, birth control, contraception, euthanasia, medicines, suicide, violence, discrimination, social justice, and war, in particular, each one has a different norm, which could be justifiable given his / her context. There is also a worry that the formation of a synodal conscience might misinterpret synodality “in an attempt to deconstruct doctrine, undermine tradition, and jeopardize ecclesial communion.”³⁹ Another fear is, in this synodal process are we all followers of Christ, followers of the elders, parents and authority figures, or are we all partners only? Is there anyone involved in teaching and formation? If leadership in the local Church is questioned or understood as authoritarianism; then, what next?

4.2 Challenges from Without - In their message of the XXXIV Plenary Assembly of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India⁴⁰ the bishops indicate various challenges (from without) which would become hurdles to the Synodal journey. Changing social conditions and the excessive use of social media, mobiles and the internet have placed enormous pressure on the harmonious life of families. Addictions to drugs, alcohol and pornography are ruining the lives of many young adults, causing disruptions within families and in society. Poverty and inhuman living conditions deprive a substantial part of our population of equitable opportunity and dignity of life, creating uncertainties about their future. Massive displacement of peoples, loss of land and fishing rights in the name of industrial and corporate development result in forced migration, dispossession, loss of livelihood and further marginalisation. Greed and consumeristic lifestyles are eroding the life of faith and the centrality of prayer. In the Indian context, it is said: the misuse of anti-conversion laws in some States and false propaganda about ‘forced conversions’ are discouraging and hindering the life and service of the Christian community. The growing culture of intolerance, hatred and even violent attacks on Christians in some quarters is a matter of grave concern to Christians in India.

4.3 Challenges from Within - Sexual abuse, clericalism and abuse of power and money are the ‘talk of the town’ very widely in the universal Church, mostly in the European, North American and Australian continents. This is not uncommon in the Indian and Asian Church too. This causes much damage to the credibility and witness of the Church in the world. In a world of uncertainties, a small spot of weakness kills the whole blanket of goodness in the Church. Caught in the web of political and social atrocities against Christianity in countries like India, the faithful and ministers tend to take a compromising or ‘yes-boss’ attitude to majoritarianism and power mongers, and thereby burying social and moral justice and Christian values.

Misuse of power and authority in the Church is a reality today, not only in the universal Church but also in the Indian Church. The danger worsens when it gets intertwined with the use or misuse of money. So, the Christian community gets confused or disheartened so much so that those who are involved in this become not only anti-

Church but also anti-Christ. 41 Although there are participatory structures such as Parish Council, Finance Council, and Basic Ecclesial Community, various pastoral and spiritual movements contribute to the synodal journey in the Church/parishes, the pyramidal or hierarchical structure in the Church is heavily prevalent in the administration and life of the Church. A common and thought-provoking complaint is that the ministers in the parish become business-oriented people and not 'servants of the Word of God.'

Racial discrimination, harassment, and victimization among the Faithful bring shame and wound the Church in many parts of the world; likewise, the caste system that perennially exists in the Indian Church causes much damage to the life, witness, and activities of the Church. Although there were many directions and observations from the Roman Pontiffs in the past, 42 this sickness is not overcome or healed; thereby pastoral ministry and life-witness are affected in many dioceses in India and there is even undue delay in the appointment of bishops. Felix Wilfred, while commenting on the 'Dialogue in Church and Society' of the Preparatory Document of the Synod (No. 30), questions: "How does collaboration work in territories where different sui juris Church are present?" We are witnessing today how the energy and time of the ritual Churches are sapped by such issues as to whether to celebrate the Eucharist facing the people or facing the wall. Could we expect greater synodality among the present three rites with a focus on the burning issues of the country, mission, and witness to the larger society?

43

Conclusion - Synod on synodality is a grace and gift of God to the Universal Church, nay, to the whole created world. It is a revamping of our baptismal commitment to ourselves and to the whole universe. It is rediscovering and reinvigorating the biblical image of the Church with re-imagining the teaching of Vatican II which speaks of the Church as a sacrament that brings God's blessing to all. Consequently, the pyramidal structure is replaced by the circular lifestyle in the Universal and local Church where Christ is the centre and all are incorporated into him through Baptism (cf. Can. 240 # 1), not for wielding authority but for service. This conciliar teaching of radical equality among the baptised members should not be viewed as a threat but a blessing for a collective ministry. 44 The thrust of Communion, Participation, and Mission, envisaged by this Synod activates us for a collective witness to Jesus Christ with our life communion and participation, not only within the members of the Church but also with the universal community. Realising the fact of social and political hurdles to our evangelical mission in the world and the human weakness of the faithful and the ministers of the Church, we should go forward in our journey towards our goal of establishing the reign of God. Let the words of St. Paul, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13-14) be our inspiration. For this synodal journey we need to take to heart

the words of Isaiah: “Enlarge the space of your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly, lengthen your ropes, and make firm your pegs” (Isa 54:2). As we enlarge the space of our heart, we strengthen/lengthen our communion, and participation to build up a harmonious society; this is our Christian mission of being “the salt of the earth and the light of the world” (cf. Mt 5:13-14).

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Pope Francis, *Commemoration of the 50 th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17, October 2015.
- 2 *The Preparatory Document suggests that the synod on synodality has been incubating at three stages: (i) Address of His Holiness Pope Francis on 17 October 2015, at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops; (ii) “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” issued by International Theological Commission on 2 March 2018; and (iii) Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the people of God on 20 August 2018.*
- 3 *Synod of Bishops, Preparatory Document for the Synod for a Synodal Church 2021-2023*, 1.
- 4 Pope Francis, *Address for Opening of Synod*, 9 October 2021.
- 5 *The Synod of Bishops is a new reality in the ecclesiology and the canon law of the Roman Catholic Church, a fruit of the Second Vatican Council. Cf. J. Schotte, “The Synod of Bishops: A Permanent yet Adaptable Church Institution,” in Studia Canonica (1992) 26, 289-306.*
- 6 *There are three types of synods: ordinary, extraordinary, and special. The ordinary synods are convoked at regular intervals. The present Synod for a Synodal Church 2021-2023 is the 16 th ordinary synod; the 15 th was on “young people, faith, and vocational discernment,” and the 14 th was on “the vocation and mission of the family in the church and in the contemporary world.” An extraordinary synod is called to deal with matters which require speedy resolution. The last one was in 2014, on “the pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization.” The synod is special when it discusses matters directly affecting a determined region. In 2019, a special synod was convoked addressing the concerns of the Pan-Amazon region, and the outcome was Querida Amazonia (2020).*
- 7 Felix Wilfred, “Synodality in Action with Butterfly Effects,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, Vol. 85/10 Oct 2021, 10.
- 8 Paulose Mangai, “Pope Francis, Synodality and Synod 2023,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, Vol. 85/10 Oct 2021, 5

- 9 Pope Francis, *Rio de Janeiro*, 28 July 2013.
- 10 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.
- 11 *The Preparatory Document*, (2021) § 10.
- 12 *The Preparatory Document*, (2021) §16
- 13 Cf. Lucas Thumma, “For Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,” *Indian Theological Studies*, Vol. LIX March 2022, No.1, p. 11.
- 14 *The Preparatory Document*, (2021) § 11.
- 15 Council of Florence (1442), DS 1331.
- 16 Pope Francis, *Address for the Opening of the Synod*, 9 Oct 2021.
- 17 *Working Document for a Continental Stage*, 10.
- 18 James J. Provost, “Book II- The People of God (204-746),” in *The Code of Canon Law- A Text and Commentary*, (eds) J. A. Coriden, T.J. Green, D. E. Heintschel (Bangalore: TPI 1986), 117.
- 19 *The Preparatory Document*, no. 2.
- 20 *Lumen Gentium* made a Copernican revolution when it placed ‘the People of God’ at Chapter II, before ‘the Hierarchy’ at Chapter III.
- 21 Pope Francis practises this theology. He embraced the Russian Orthodox patriarch, signed a joint declaration with Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the highest authority in Sunni Islam, visited the Arabian Peninsula, fetched home three migrant families, and reached out to the Pentecostal churches.
- 22 With Pope Francis the shift from ‘either-or’ to ‘both-and’ is very quick and clear. The first encyclical of Pope Francis – though initiated by his predecessor – *Lumen Fidei* (‘Light of faith’), 2013, puts forward the polar opposites of ‘believing and seeking,’ ‘illusory and real,’ and ‘faith and works’ in a ‘both/and’ mode. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), his first apostolic exhortation, Holy Father arranges ‘confession of faith and commitment to society’ (nos. 178-179) juxtaposed to each other. Faith and society cannot be separated. The apostolic exhortation on family, *Amoris Laetitia* (2015), puts forward both the theological enquiry and the pastoral concerns about the institution of family. In *Gaudete et exsultate* (2018), Pope Francis breaks the wall between the spiritual world and the secular sphere. In the post-synodal exhortation of the synod on youth, faith, and vocational discernment, *Christus Vivit* (2019), the Holy Father adopts a model of accompaniment of ‘the Church with the youth,’ instead of ‘the Church for the

youth.' Finally, when we put together the encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* we have beautiful blend of 'creation and humanity,' and 'care and responsibility.'

- 23 Pope Francis, *Address for the Ceremony Commemorating the 50 th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015).
- 24 *Lumen Gentium*, 31.
- 25 *Ad Gentes*, no.2
- 26 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24.
- 27 Cf. Pope Francis, "More Responsibility for the Laity," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed. 2 October 2015, 16.
- 28 This theme is developed in Pope Francis' *Misericordiae Vultus*, and *Fratelli Tutti*.
- 29 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.
- 30 *Ad Gentes*, 5, 11; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21, 41; *Redemptoris Missio*, 42.
- 31 Pope Benedict, *Verbum Domini*, 95.
- 32 *The Angelus Message*, 21, April 2015.
- 33 *Verbum Domini*, 100.
- 34 L. Legrand, *The Word is Near You*, Vol. II (Bangalore 2002), 165.
- 35 *National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation*, CCBI, 11, Aug 2022.
- 36 Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Synodality in Action with Butterfly Effect," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological reflection*, Vol. 85/10 Oct 2021, 21-22.
- 37 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual people collectively.
- 38 Cf. Yesu Karunanidhi, "Synodality: The Pastoral-Theological Vision of Pope Francis for the Universal Church," in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 86/1, Jan 2022, 18-34.
- 39 S. P. White, "Synodality is what you make of it," in *Ethics and Public Policy Center*, 9 Sep 2022, online publication accessed from <https://eppc.org/publication/synodality-is-what-you-make-of-it/>, on 15 Oct 2022. 40 Held in January 24-30, 2023, St. John's National Academy of Health Sciences, Bengaluru.

- 41 *“The Church in India Today: Credibility and Witness,” Indian Theological Association Statement 2021, Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, Vol 85/9 September 2021, no. 11-12.*
- 42 *Pope John Paul II, Ad Limina Visit of the Bishops of India in 20023’ Pope Benedict XVI, Ad Limina Visit of the Bishops of Tamilnadu, India in 2011.*
- 43 *Felix Wilfred, “Synodality in Action with Butterfly Effect,” Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, Vol. 85/10 Oct 2021, 24.*
- 44 *Cf. Thomas Doyle, Rights and Responsibilities: A Catholic Guide to the New Code of Canon Law (New York:1983), 8.*

To contact the author:

Most Rev. Antonysamy Peter Abir, Bishop of Sultanpet & Chairman, Bible Commission, Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, Bishop's House, Mathakovil Street, Sultanpet, Palakkad- 678 001, Kerala, India, +91 9443140553,
Web: www.sultanpetdiocese.org